The Long Road

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Mike Hoyle took off his jacket, closed his eyes, threw back his head and savoured the warmth of the July Sun. An orange sensation seemed to permeate not just his eyelids but his entire being. There was a gentle breeze now, and it tickled his skin beneath his thin nylon shirt. This was the first time he'd been out in the Sun for over a year, and he realised he was a lucky man to be standing here now, for only a short while ago, he had almost given up hope of ever seeing it again, at least, as a free man. And if he'd had to spend the rest of his life in one of HM prisons he doubted he'd have wanted to see it; most likely he'd have killed himself, or gone mad. But that was over now, lost forever like the past year and a bit. No more foolish talk, no more brooding, no more madness.

"You cracked it, son!" he said aloud, and turned left into the market.

'Go lucky man,' and, he had to admit it, Mike Hoyle had been born lucky. He'd done some foolish things in his life, some absolutely stupid things: he'd never saved much money, never been too bright, never achieved much, but he'd always been lucky, and sometimes that counted for more than anything else.

Sixteen months previously, he'd been facing a murder charge. It had been stupid the way it had happened. He'd been out drinking one night and gotten into an argument about, of all things, football. True, he had been to a few matches that season, he went every season, but he wasn't what you'd call a fan. The man he'd argued with had been Michael Stone, a 28 year old market trader and an ardent supporter of his least favourite team. He'd also been a bit of a know-all, and twice the size of Mike Hoyle.

Not that that had bothered the smaller man; he'd always known how to handle himself. The trouble was, to do that he'd grown accustomed to using a knife. Among his eight previous convictions, four were for violence, including one of wounding and one of possessing an offensive weapon. Mike Hoyle was always clever about settling scores though, or if not clever, then discreet. He'd never attack anyone in front of witnesses. On this occasion he hadn't actually come to blows with his antagonist; Stone had already left the bar. The sensible thing would have been to finish his drink and leave before he returned. But the drink had give him other ideas and he'd followed Stone into the toilet with evil intentions. True, he hadn't meant to kill him, but he had meant to teach him a lesson. Stone had had other ideas though, and there had been a terrible fight in which the bigger man had been stabbed fourteen times in the arms and chest.

Mike Hoyle had escaped uncut though not unhurt, but he had done something after the fight which was to save him from spending the rest of his life in prison. He'd taken his knife and stabbed himself four times, twice in each arm. It was this act which had enabled his barrister at the appeal to argue successfully that his conviction for the murder of Michael Stone had been unsafe and that there was genuine uncertainty as to the

ownership of the knife. At the trial, none of this had been believed by the jury, but after his conviction, his solicitor had found a woman who had sworn that on two occasions she had seen the victim carrying a similar knife. And the appeal judges had been swayed by the testimony of another, expert witness who had said that although Hoyle's wounds could have been self-inflicted, they probably were not.

After careful deliberation the judges had quashed the murder conviction, set aside the life sentence and imposed a three year sentence for manslaughter. They could not, they said, impose a lighter sentence because it had still been a very serious case; the dead man had suffered fourteen stab wounds, which clearly amounted to using more than reasonable force. There was also the matter of the defendant's previous convictions.

To Mike Hoyle though, the three year sentence was a picnic. The sense of relief and sheer joy he had felt on its announcement had been simply indescribable. And to receive parole on top, and with his previous...Yes, he had indeed been born lucky. Now he was out again, free to enjoy the summer sunshine, free to live and, at this very moment, to buy some new clothes.

In prison he had put on quite a bit of weight; that was most unlike him. Although he would hardly qualify as athletic he had kept himself in trim over the years. He'd gone running two or three times a week, done a bit of weight training and was a proficient swimmer. But since the murder conviction he had allowed himself to go right downhill. True, the sports facilities in the various prisons and remand centres where he had been held had not amounted to much, but he could still have kept himself fit; in fact, after a while, he had gone off the rails mentally too. He had suffered a terrible depression for weeks. If it hadn't been for Julia, her visits and her many letters, he wouldn't have known what he'd have done. God bless her! His own guardian angel.

His hand moved to the inside pocket of his jacket and he clutched at the wallet before putting it on. Yes, it was still there, and all the money. Julia had given him that too, on his release. She had been waiting for him at the gate, but she hadn't been alone.

Mike Hoyle hated his sister's husband, and not just because her husband hated him. He was a fat, stupid-looking little man, and he chewed tobacco. Whatever she saw in a creature like Lawrence, he couldn't fathom. Julia had wanted her brother to come and live with them, at least until he had got himself sorted out, readjusted to the outside world. Lawrence had put the brake on that idea. But hate him though he did, Mike Hoyle could hardly blame him for that. Wasn't it true the things he'd heard Lawrence say about him behind his back: that he was no-good, a petty crook, a drunkard? and now...No! he wasn't that, the judges had said so.

"Ooh, careful, guv."

"Wha? Oh, I'm sorry."

He realised he had stopped dead in his tracks; he'd been daydreaming again. The old man pushed past him hurriedly and turned into the market. As this was where he had been heading, Mike Hoyle turned and followed him.

He'd never been to this market before; according to Julia it was the longest one in the country. It looked quite cheap, too. He checked his mental shopping list: training shoes, trousers, some new underclothes, a shirt or two, a nice jacket. He put or tried to put everything else out of his mind. He'd get himself kitted out, take it easy for a week or two, lose some weight maybe, then make some money. He didn't quite know how he was going to do that; maybe he'd find himself a job, if anyone would take him on.

As most of the stalls near the entrance to the market were selling fruit and vegetables he walked the first fifty yards at a brisk pace. Then he reached a stall which was selling denim: jeans, jackets, shirts, all in denim. He walked over to it and inspected a jean suit which was hung up at the side. He ran his fingers up and down the hem, touched the studs and muttered to himself.

The stallholder, a young man with red hair, turned to him. "That's a bit big for you, mate, but there's plenty more here."

Mike Hoyle smiled, turned up the sleeve to look at the price and replied, "Just looking, thank you."

The man smiled back and turned away as another customer approached. She was a woman in her early forties, very short, and in spite of the weather, she was wearing a long raincoat. She was also staring at Mike Hoyle intently. He caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye, looked at her briefly then turned back to the denim suit. The stallholder had bent forward to hear what the woman was saying; she was whispering. The man smiled at first, then his face became hard as he turned his glance towards Mike Hoyle.

He left the denim stall and turned to walk deeper into the market. He'd gone twenty yards when he heard the man's voice behind him.

"Excuse me, mate."

"Mike Hoyle turned, "Yes."

"That lady said she recognised you."

"Me?" he was genuinely puzzled.

"Yeah, you!" the man's tone was clearly aggressive.

Mike Hoyle shrugged his shoulders not knowing what to say.

"Small world."

"Yeah, it is, mate. Mickey Stone used to work on this market."

“Who?” the question was genuine; he didn’t recognise the name ‘Mickey’ Stone.

“Mickey Stone: ’e used to work ’ere years ago.”

Mike Hoyle opened his mouth, but the young man spoke first.

“We don’t like your sort ’ere; you’d better push off.”

Mike Hoyle became aggressive momentarily, then checked himself. He’d been out of prison barely twenty-four hours and he had no intention of going straight back no intention of ever going back.

“What do you mean: my sort?”

“I’ll tell you what I mean,” he advanced, snarling, “I mean we don’t want your sort...”

“Okay, I’m going, I’m going,” he interrupted. He turned and walked off quickly.

A few seconds later he heard the single word shouted above the hustle and bustle of the market: “Scum!”

He looked back, continuing to walk quickly as he did and came up with a jolt as he collided with a young woman. She was bare legged, wearing high heels and carrying two full shopping bags.

“Ow!” she cried.

As he turned back, one of the women’s heels gave way and, her leg twisting underneath her, she fell awkwardly. He clutched at her but missed.

“Oh, sorry love.”

“Why don’t you watch where you’re bleedin’ well goin’?”

She pulled herself to her feet. He bent down to help her pick up her shopping. Potatoes and apples spilled from one of her bags.

“I’ll get it.”

“Leave it, will ya?!”

He ignored her.

“Sorry about that, I was...”

"I said leave it!"

A powerful hand dug into his forearm; he stared at her, fascinated. The woman’s fingers were like claws; her fingernails were long, steel-like and strong. He continued staring at her in disbelief. Pulling herself to her full, impressive height, she towered over him in her

high heels. Her eyes were cold. She released his arm, then bent down to retrieve her goods. He stood back and watched her, stunned.

“I’m sorry,” he said as he straightened up. The woman ignored him and walked off carrying her shopping. He shook his head, then two voices rang in his ears.

They were a middle aged couple, and it seemed they were talking deliberately for his benefit.

“Another trouble-maker, Mavis.”

“I don’t know what the world’s coming to, Jim; they didn’t ought to let that sort back on the streets.”

He froze. The way the woman had stressed the words ‘sort’ and ‘back’ said it all. She was saying that his sort should not be allowed out of prison. There could be no mistaking it. Suddenly, Mike Hoyle had an eerie feeling that something was terribly wrong with this market; he turned round determined to get out of it as quickly as possible. Again he didn’t look where he was going and again he slammed into someone, this time it was a man.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I...” his voice trailed off as he realised he had collided with a policeman. The officer pushed him away gently.

“Careful sir. Where’s the fire?”

There were two of them; both men were constables. The man standing in front of him was about forty years old; the second was much younger.

“I’m sorry, I was just...”

“Leaving sir?” said the younger policeman.

He stood back, arms folded and both his tone and manner could rightly be described as cocky.

“Yes,” said Mike Hoyle, “there’s nothing I want here.”

“You weren’t following that lady were you, sir?” asked the older policeman suspiciously.

“Following her? Of course not,” he laughed uneasily.

The policeman’s radio blared loudly.

“Just a moment, sir.”

He unclipped it from the inside of his jacket and, holding it up, spoke into it.

“Well, I’ll be on my way then.”

He sidestepped the older policeman, but as he went to walk away, the younger one stepped in front of him. He did so moving sideways like a crab in almost comical fashion. At any other time, Mike Hoyle, might have laughed, but his sense of humour was rapidly draining from him in this market.

“Not so fast, sir; we haven’t finished with you yet.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. The other policeman replaced his radio then turned to him as well. He was sandwiched between them.

“Look,” he began.

“Won’t keep you a moment, sir; not in any hurry are you?”

“No, of course not,” he smiled as best he could.

“Good, would you mind telling us your name, sir?”

A lump rose in his throat as he answered, “Hoyle, Michael James Hoyle. Look, you really don’t think I was following that woman, do you?” he laughed again, a false laugh.

The younger policeman, arms crossed, stared blankly into his face; the older one ignored him but took out his radio again.

“Your date of birth, sir?”

‘Oh God,’ he thought, ‘he’s going to CRO me’.

He shrugged his shoulders and half whispered his date of birth. The policeman spoke into the radio again and the three men waited in silence for half a minute. The policeman repeated the reply. “Known, not wanted, not disqualified.” He smiled disarmingly, “Well, that’ll be all, Mr Hoyle.”

“I can go?” he asked, almost surprised.

“Mistaken identity,” said the older policeman.

“I thought you were someone else,” said the other one.

Mike Hoyle thought for a second; they hadn’t asked him for any identification or even for his address. He thought it best not to mention this; he wanted to get out of here. Before he could take another step though, the older policeman asked, “Going to buy some new training shoes, Mr Hoyle?”

He turned back to him, “Yes, how, how did you know that?”

The policeman looked down at his tatty trainers, “I don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes to figure that out.”

He looked down too, embarrassed.

The younger policeman pointed deeper into the market. “There’s a good shoe stall down there on the right; they’re having a sale this week.”

Mike Hoyle didn’t want to go deeper into the market but the two policemen turned towards the exit.

“See you around sir, thank you for your time.”

They walked off and suddenly he felt a lot more comfortable about pressing on. It was always a good sign when a policeman was walking in one direction and he the other.

He took a few steps forward then shrugged his shoulders; he’d obviously imagined the whole thing. Okay, so somebody had recognised him, but it was a small world, and the stallholder had taken umbrage, but that wasn’t unusual; Mike Stone might have been a mate of his. And the woman with the shopping bag, well, she was just weird. As for the policemen, well, he was scruffily dressed, had a tattoo on his neck, and his skin was a shade of prison pallor. It was hardly unlikely that he’d get stopped. The copper himself had said he was no Sherlock Holmes, but he’d guessed what he’d intended to buy from the state of his clothes. And they hadn’t even asked him for ID, so they were probably just fishing, or even bored.

As he walked deeper into the market, a little girl of perhaps nine looked up at him as they passed each other. He smiled, but the girl’s eyes widened and she quickened her step. He turned his head; the girl looked back at him then ran off. He shook his head: “Don’t talk to strange men, little girl.”

He smiled again, this time to himself. It wasn’t him who was paranoid this time.

He reached the shoe stall which the policeman had mentioned and stood in the centre of the road staring at it a while. There weren’t that many people about now. He looked at his watch: twelve thirty. He thought it would have been busier this time of day, but evidently not.

He walked up to the stall and picked up a training shoe. As he held it in his hand, the stallholder came up to him.

“What size do you take?” he asked in a flat, uninterested tone.

“Er, size nine,” Mike Hoyle said, “have you...”

“Sold out,” the man interrupted.

“What have you got in size nine,” he asked.

“Nothing at all,” he took the shoe, “all sold out, size nine.”

“Just my luck,” he thought as the man turned away.

He went to turn away himself, but as he did, his eyes fell on a shoe higher up the display. It was a slightly more expensive pair, and not the colour he wanted, but clearly marked on the box was the legend: SIZE NINE.

He reached out for it, but before he could touch it, a hand snaked out in front of him and grabbed it. It belonged to the stallholder.

“That’s sold, that one.”

Mike Hoyle felt uneasy again. It was nothing tangible, but there was something definitely not quite right about this place; it had a bad atmosphere.

“Have you got anything in size ten?” he asked, “I can fit a ten just about.”

The stallholder had taken the shoe and was fixing it to the display at the back of the stall. He appeared not to hear what Mike Hoyle had said.

“Have you got a ten?” he asked again.

The man answered with his back towards him.

“There’s nothin’ for you ’ere, guv’ner, try further down.”

Mike Hoyle rubbed his chin and walked away from the stall. He wanted to leave again but decided to give it one more try. Walking further on he saw a shoe shop on the other side of the road. There weren’t many shops here; most were boarded up, so this one was prominent. He walked over to it, but as he reached the door, the manager came out holding a bunch of keys. He turned and locked the door behind him.

“Are you closed?” asked Mike Hoyle in disbelief.

The man withdrew the key from the lock and walked off appearing not to have heard him.

He shook his head: this was too much. What he needed was a good stiff drink; there must be a pub down here. He walked in a bit further but couldn’t see one, so, deciding on the next best thing, he made for the nearest café.

Walking through the door of the *Market Café* he joined the queue at the counter. There were four people waiting to be served; most of the seats were taken and the place was both noisy and very hot. Behind the counter a burly man in white overalls was serving an old lady in a straw hat. There were three other staff out the front and someone at work in the kitchen. The three other servers were a woman and two young girls; the woman was obviously the wife of the man, and the girls, his daughters. As he reached the front of the queue, the door opened behind him and Mike Hoyle fanned his tatty shirt.

“Yes sir,” said the man behind the counter, looking up but not at him.

He fumbled in his pocket and came up with a five pound note. “Tea without sugar and a bacon sandwich please.”

The man turned away and poured a cup of tea. He disappeared into the kitchen and a few seconds later returned with a sandwich on a plate. Picking up the cup of tea he held out both articles. Mike Hoyle reached out for them, the note in his right hand, and the man behind him stepped forward and took both the sandwich and the drink.

“Tea without sugar and cheese sandwich,” said the server in his slightly Latin accent.

Mike Hoyle opened his mouth to speak again, and this time the man looked straight at him.

“Yes, can I help you?”

“A tea without sugar and a bacon sandwich, please,” he replied, altering what he had intended to say.

This time the man poured a cup of tea and, taking a spoon, measured two spoonsful of sugar into it. Mike Hoyle leaned over the counter.

“I said no sugar, please.”

The man turned around, “And bread pudding?”

“No, a bacon sandwich.”

The man reached into the display cabinet, took out a slab of bread pudding and placed it on a small plate.

“Bacon sandwich,” Mike Hoyle repeated, but the man took the cup and saucer and plate and placed them on the counter next to him.

“Forty-eight pence, please,” he said to no one in particular. The woman behind Mike Hoyle stepped forward and paid with a pound coin.

“Thank you,” she said.

Taking the money, the man rang up the amount and began removing the woman’s change from the till.

“Excuse me, but I was here first,” Mike Hoyle said leaning forward right over the counter, and now visibly angry.

“Thank you,” the server gave the woman her change then said, “next please.”

The man behind Mike Hoyle stepped forward and said, “Fish, chips and peas, please.”

Mike Hoyle looked at him, “I don’t believe this,” he said.

Turning back to the counter he said to the server, “Excuse me.”

“Fish, chips and peas”, the man repeated, ignoring him.

“Excuse me!” he raised his voice, but still the man ignored him and began serving up the chips.

“Excuse me!” Mike Hoyle’s fist banged down angrily onto the counter.

The man stopped dead, put down the wire chip server and turned to his irate and apparently unwanted customer.

“What you want?” he asked coldly.

“I’ve been standing here...”

“Join the queue,” the man said, then turned abruptly away.

“I’m at the front of the queue,” he replied loudly, then turning saw six people, all sad-faced men, standing behind him.

The noise of the café had died down a little, but no one was looking at him. What was he to do? Fear told him he should leave at once; anger said he should stay where he was and demand to be served. He walked to the back of the queue. This was weird. ’Leave’ said a voice inside his head. ’Leave while you can’, but although there was something desperately wrong with this café, with this entire market, he had to stay, had to find out what. ’Play the game’, he thought, ’play the game and see what happens.’

Five minutes later he was at the head of the queue again.

“Next,” said the man behind the counter.

“One tea without sugar and a bacon sandwich, please,” he said as calmly and as politely as he could.

“No bacon,” the man said, “Yes please,” he was already talking to the next customer.

“Then I’ll have a tea without sugar and one of these, please.” He pointed to a cake.

“Chicken, chips and two veg’,” the man behind him said.

“Chicken, chips and two veg’,” the man behind the counter repeated to the kitchen.

“Excuse me,” Mike Hoyle banged down on the counter, “I want...”

“Bacon off,” the man interrupted, “join the queue.” He pointed then turned away.

Mike Hoyle looked around and saw eight grim-faced men standing behind him. He felt anger welling up inside him, anger and fear. This was no time to argue; he had to get out of here, and fast. He walked to the door, wrenched it open and turned into the street walking back up towards the entrance to the market.

“Hello again, sir.”

Mike Hoyle looked up and saw the two policemen who had stopped him a few minutes earlier.

“Oh, hello,” he said.

“Didn’t get your new trainers,” said the younger policeman.

“No, not yet,” he stopped momentarily. For a second it came into his mind to tell them just what had happened in the café, but he dismissed the idea at once. Michael Hoyle was no grass, not that something like that would count as grassing, but anyway, what would he tell them? He didn’t want to cause any trouble, nor was he interested anymore in finding out what was wrong here. He just wanted to get out of this market fast.

“Didn’t they have your size, then?” asked the young policeman.

“Pardon?”

“The shoe stall, didn’t they have your size?”

“No.”

The senior policeman stepped forward, “I should try further down if I were you, sir; there’s a lot of other shoe stalls down there. This is a very big market.”

“Yes, I know, I was thinking of...”

As he said this he went to move away, but the young policeman moved towards him and took him gently by the arm. “Why don’t you try further down like my colleague said?”

“I really...”

The policeman’s finger dug into his arm and he felt like it was being squeezed in a vice. The police officer interrupted what he’d begun to say, and his tone was distinctly nasty.

“Never mind what you think; have a look further down.”

He span Mike Hoyle around before releasing his grip. Shocked, he rubbed his bruised arm.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

The other officer stepped forward, “Just giving you some friendly advice, Mr Hoyle.”

Mike Hoyle stuck his chin out defiantly, “I don’t want to go further down; I want to go home.”

The younger officer sidled up to him and leered sarcastically, “I want to go to South America for my holidays, but I can’t go there either. Now push off!”

“And what if I don’t?”

“I’ll nick yer!”

“You’ll nick me, what for?”

“We’ll think of something,” said the older policeman, stepping forward, “now are you going to move along?”

It was an open ended question; Mike Hoyle turned away and walked off in the other direction.

‘Keep walking,’ he thought to himself, ‘keep walking and don’t look back.’

He’d walk straight through the market, or maybe he’d turn out of it at the next sidestreet. As he walked, he realised he was shaking, no, he wasn’t just shaking, he was trembling. something was terribly wrong here, terribly, terribly wrong. And it wasn’t just the one thing, it was everything, everything and everyone. As he walked he realised that practically every person he passed: man, woman and child was, if not staring at him, then looking at him in an odd manner. Some threw furtive glances, others when they caught sight of him looked away quickly.

He passed another shoe stall but didn’t stop to look at the trainers. He knew somehow that if he did, he would once again be told that size nine was sold out. A little way past the stall he turned and looked over his shoulder. No more than thirty yards behind him was the young policeman, and when their eyes met, he smiled an ugly leer and waved his forefinger in time with his shaking head.

Mike Hoyle turned back and walked on. He was now on a sort of hill and could see right down the length of the market, at least, he could see a long way, but not to the end. He couldn’t walk all the way down there, he had to get out as quickly as he could. He left the centre of the road and walked on the path behind the stalls until he came to a narrow alleyway. He turned into it.

It was dark because the bare walls either side were windowless and it was both unlit and in shadow. All the same, as it was the middle of the day, there was a enough light to see by. Certainly there was more than enough light for him to see the two muscular figures who stood leaning up against one of the walls.

As he approached them, the figure nearest him raised his head in his direction and smiled. He was black, tall, very stocky, dressed in jeans and sweatshirt, and as he smiled, a gold tooth glistened in his mouth.

“Hey, Petey,” he called over his shoulder to his companion.

“Yeah man,” another black face came into view as its owner leaned forward.

Mike Hoyle stopped dead in his tracks.

“Hey man, lend us a pound,” the first man called.

Mike Hoyle was streetwise, but even if he hadn't been, common sense would have told him not to talk another step forward. He turned around and walked quickly out of the alley; one of the men called something after him as he left, but he couldn't make out what.

Leaving the alley, he walked backed into the centre of the market. There were more people about now. It must be nearly one o'clock, he thought to himself, but on holding up his watch, he was surprised to see that it was just half past twelve. At first he thought it must have stopped, but he blinked and saw the second hand was still moving. He decided that he must have misread it earlier; that was easily done, and at the moment he had far more important things on his mind.

Walking on a bit further, he came to a sidestreet on the other side of the market, the sunny side. Quickening his step he crossed over and turned into it. As he did so, he got quite a shock, for standing in the middle of the footpath was one of the policemen again, the older one.

"Hello again, Mr Hoyle," he said pleasantly.

Mike Hoyle stepped into the road but the policeman moved in front of him.

"Haven't got your new shoes yet, sir?"

"No, I..."

"None at all. Why don't you try further down the market?"

The fear returned; Mike Hoyle clasped his fists until his knuckles whitened, then he turned round and ran. Although the crowd was now quite thick, he had little trouble picking his way through it without bumping into anyone. He ran for perhaps half a minute then turned his head and looked back. He walked on. His breath was short and laboured, his hands and his whole body were trembling. But by making a conscious and determined effort he managed somehow to take charge of himself once more.

For how much longer and how much further he walked he had no idea, but when he looked at his watch again it was still only twelve thirty-two. He held it up to his ear and listened intently. Yes, it was still ticking, but there must be something wrong with it, he had used up much more than a minute since he left the alley. He walked up onto the path again and looked in shop windows as he passed them. No clocks were visible in the first few, but when he paused in front of a newsagent's he saw an electric clock on the nearside wall over the assistant's head. The time showed up clearly; twelve thirty-two. He stood staring at it when he felt a thump in his back. Next thing a small boy toppled over at his feet. He was wearing roller skates and had clearly not been looking where he was going. As he fell he cursed aloud, more like a navvy than a schoolboy. Mike Hoyle bent down to help him up.

"You all right, kid?"

The boy said nothing until Mike's hands clasped his shoulders, then he reacted violently.

“Get off!” he shouted, “shouldn’t stand in the middle of the pavement.”

“You shouldn’t roller skate on the path,” he snapped back. the boy had thrown his arms up to ward off his unwanted helper; as he did so his right hand gripped Mike Hoyle’s arm. It was a vice-like grip, a grip far too strong to be that of a mere child. A sear of pain shot up his arm and he tried desperately to struggle free. As he did so, the boy’s eyes met his and the two of them stared hatefully at each other.

“Don’t touch me, scum!” uttered the boy in a flat, even tone. Then, releasing his arm, the boy skated off. He stood shaking, then walked out into the middle of the market again. As h walked, something about the way the boy had gripped his arm triggered something in his brain. Of course, the policeman had held his arm like that, and before him, the woman with the shopping bags. It was not just that all had been extremely tight, unnaturally strong even. It was that they all felt exactly the same It had been the same grip, not just the same kind of grip, but the same grip. It was as though the woman, the policeman and the boy had all held his arm with the same hand.

He walked on further until he came to another slight hill. As he had before, he looked down the length of the market as far as the eye could see. And all that way there were stalls and a sea of people. Just how long was this market? He must have walked miles already. With that he decided he would go no further; he had to turn back and get out of here. If the two policemen were still following him that was too bad. They could only arrest him. Let them! He’d done nothing wrong, and if they did arrest him they would have to get a van to transport him to the station. That would be one way of getting out of here.

He had gone no more than thirty yards when he saw them again. The senior policeman was walking in the middle of the market; the young one was hiding, yes hiding behind a fruit stall on the other side. Mike Hoyle walked straight up to the policeman in the middle of the market and spoke to him directly.

“I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’m leaving now.”

The policeman crossed his arms in front of his chest, smiled slightly and shook his head slowly.

“Oh no?” he walked around him but a black clad arm shot out and grabbed his. Again it was a vice-like grip, but by this time he was in no mood to play games. He threw himself against the policeman and knocked him off-balance. The officer gave a yelp, released his arm and fell over, then the desperate man ran back up the market as fast as his legs would carry him. Behind him a whistle sounded, and although he didn’t look round he knew the other policeman was in hot pursuit. The whole market seemed to have ground to a halt, everyone was standing still: shoppers, browsers, traders, and all were staring at him. The whistle sounded again, and before he had covered the first fifty yards he knew he would never make it to the entrance; his only chance lay in finding a sidestreet or alley he could dive down to shake his tormentors off. He saw an alley ahead, and veering to the left, sped down it like a champion sprinter.

A way down he came to a fork, the alley itself was very similar to the other one he had tried to escape down except that it was not as dark as being on the other side of the street. At the fork he had a choice to make: left or right, he thought? He chose the right hand path and came up against a dead end. Turning back as quickly as he could, he followed the other path, here it was darker, there were no sodium lamps, the walls were bare and the buildings either side were so high that the only light came from directly above.

He ran and ran, the line of sight curved, but as it straightened out he realised this branch was another dead end. He came up against a solid brick wall, it was very high, much too high to climb, and above it the sky seemed to curve over, trapping him in. He stood up against the wall and caught his breath, shaking his head in defeat. Now what? All he could do was wait. He wondered momentarily what was the purpose of the alleyway. Surely it should link the market to another street? What was the point of having a long, two-pronged dead end? He was still wondering this when he heard footsteps. The young policeman came into view and strolled leisurely up to him.

“You do like givin’ us the runaround, don’t ya?”

Mike Hoyle caught his breath again, and, regaining some of his composure, tried to stay calm.

“What do you want?”

“Want?”

“Yes, what’s going on?”

The policeman approached him.

“I’ll tell you what’s going on, shall I? You just assaulted a police officer in the execution of his duty. You know what you can get for that?”

“You’d better nick me then, hadn’t yer?”

His voice sounded a lot braver than he felt, but he knew the policeman had no intention of arresting him.

“Out!” he stood pointing backwards with his thumb.

“Out where?”

“Out in the street.”

“And what if I don’t, what you gonna do then?”

Suddenly the policeman snarled, advanced on him, gripped him by both lapels and threw him like a rag doll.

“Don’t get cheeky with me, sunshine: get out!”

Mike Hoyle landed in a dishevelled heap. As he did so, his foot hit something metallic and he heard the chink of steel on concrete. He rose to a crouch and saw a heavy spanner; it was rusty and had obviously been lying there for some time. The policeman came towards him again.

“I said out. Didn’t you hear me?”

Mike grabbed the spanner, rose quickly to his feet and, wielding the rusty implement like a cudgel, brought it down in a smashing blow across the policeman’s face. Even as he did so he realised the enormity of what he had done. In an instant he felt a sick feeling inside as his stomach turned over. In his mind’s eye he pictured the judge who had sentenced him to life imprisonment sentencing him again, only this time it really would be for life. But the policeman didn’t fall dead at his feet, instead, his head snapped back on his shoulders and an ugly red gash appeared over his left eye, spreading down his cheek. He remained on his feet and, in slow motion, raised his hand to his face and drew it down vertically so that a streak of blood rubbed off. He looked down at his bloody hand then at Mike Hoyle. Then he spoke, and his speech too was in slow motion, “Oh, Mr Hoyle, you shouldn’t have done that.”

The voice was unreal, mechanical, almost like a robot. Mike Hoyle’s mouth opened in astonishment; he took a step back, dropped the spanner and ran back up the alley as though pursued by the Devil himself.

When he emerged from the alley, he turned back up the way he had come, but as soon as he stepped out into the full glare of the Sun he saw that was impossible. The crowd had stopped moving, the market had stopped trading, everything was still, and silent. And all eyes were on him. He took one step forward then a familiar face came into view; it was the other policeman. He read Mike Hoyle’s mind and, shaking his head, pointed a finger in the opposite direction. Silently he obeyed. He turned and walked into the crowd, and as he did so it began to move again. People were moving hurriedly in both directions, traders were calling out prices, men were reaching for their wallets and women for their purses.

He walked on. The Sun beat down on the top of his head, his throat was dry, he parted his lips and thought of a long, cold drink, but he knew that for the moment he had to keep on walking. How much farther he walked he could only guess, but when he held up his watch it read twelve thirty-four, and although it seemed like an hour, in his continuum only a minute had passed.

He walked on and on, again he came to a sort of hill, and again as he looked down, the market seemed to go on forever. And now, something strange was happening. The Sun was lower in the sky, and bright orange rather than yellow. The crowds had become denser, people were swirling on both sides of him, but they were all moving in the direction of the Sun. There were still traders on the stalls, vegetables, fresh fish, flowers, clothes, but the shoppers became fewer and fewer as the crowds became thicker.

He wanted desperately to turn back and run in the opposite direction, but he knew that was impossible. He thought of turning off at the next sidestreet, or perhaps walking up onto the path then darting into a shop and out through the back door, but he realised he could no longer see the shops, then the path was lost from sight. All he could see were the road, the people and the stalls. Everything beyond that was a blur of bright orange; when he tried to look directly into it, it hurt his eyes.

He kept walking towards the Sun. Holding up his wrist he looked at his watch again; it said twelve thirty-seven, yet he knew that it must be much later than that. For one thing, he had been walking for hours, of that he was certain, for another, the Sun was much too low in the sky. The crowds grew even thicker. There could be no question of his turning back; he would never be able to force his way through the mass of people behind him, it was like a football crowd.

Now they were walking six or seven abreast, or rather they were marching, marching towards the setting Sun. And something else, but what? He looked sideways at the man marching next to him, he tried to make out his features but couldn't. Something strange seemed to be happening to the faces of the people, they looked blurred, blurred and orange. He turned his head as he continued marching; the crowd was now thicker than any he had ever seen. It wasn't like a crowd of human beings so much as a thick, solid mass of ants. There might have been tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people behind him. And now there seemed to be just as many in front. Where had they all come from, and, more importantly, where were they and he going?

His legs ached, his head ached too, the latter with a dull throb that was almost audible. And his throat felt so dry. Something touched his arm. He ignored it, but a voice came in his right ear: "Hello Mike."

His head shot round and he saw standing next to him a face he remembered from about twelve months back.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Don't you recognise me?" asked the man with the thin moustache.

"Yes. D Wing." He knew the face but couldn't put a name to it.

The man did that for him.

"Braxton," he said, "I did my wife in. Remember?"

"Yes," he nodded his head, "you appealed."

Braxton nodded, "So did you."

"I got off," he said.

"Did you?" asked Braxton dryly.

He didn’t answer. He looked away for a second, when he turned back, Braxton’s face had grown less discernible. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again, Braxton had gone. He looked both sides and turned his head round as best he could, but he was nowhere to be seen.

He stumbled and would have fallen but a by now familiar vice-like hand gripped his arm and pulled him to his feet. It seemed that everyone in this market was super strong.

“Thanks,” he began, but as he turned towards his helper the words dried up in his mouth. Although the face he saw was blurred and orange he had no trouble making out who it belonged to. The long red scar made certain of that.

The young policeman grinned at him, a cadaverous grin, for behind the orange blur his face was deathly white.

“Keep walking, Mr Hoyle.”

They marched on, the Sun was very low in the sky now, but still very little time had passed.

He looked at his watch, it said twelve forty now. When he looked back, the policeman was no longer there. On they marched, on and on. Now all he could see was the Sun and what looked like a stream of fluid, but which he knew was really a swarming mass of humanity.

“Keep walking”, the policeman had said. Yes, that was all he could do. He looked at his watch yet again, it was still only twelve forty-two, yet he was sure that hours had passed rather than minutes. The Sun had come to rest just above the horizon, he wondered if it would sink any lower: he hoped not. He hoped too that the time would continue to pass an hour to a minute, because although his feet ached, his throat scorched and his head felt as though it was going to burst, the one thing he dreaded more than trekking towards the seemingly endless setting Sun was the thought of what awaited him at the end of the market.